Peter the Great - Military Reforms

Peter the Great’s military reforms massively modernised Russia’s Army and Navy. By his death in 1725, Russia's military was a force to be reckoned with. These reforms supplemented the reforms that were going on at a general domestic level.

The Russia army was both enlarged and made into a professional unit by Peter the Great. Peter had a very clear idea about the direction of his foreign policy and he needed a strong army to execute this. A strong army would also make his own position much stronger and free him from the threat of coups.

Before the rule of Peter the Great, the Russian army had been amateur. It was basically based on villagers going into battle to defend the Motherland, lead by village elders with no or little knowledge about military leadership. There were some professionals in the army but they were few and far between. The Streltsy and the Cossacks were professional units but they were officered by foreigners.

Peter the Great took the best parts of both systems and introduced a standing army in 1699. All soldiers received similar training so that the army had uniformity. The Streltsy was abolished. Peter the Great had hated it ever since it had backed a joint rule between Peter and Ivan. Two new elite Guards regiments were created - the Preobrazhenskii and the Semeovskii. These were officered by an elite. From 1705 on, both nobles and serfs could be conscripted for life-long service in the army. By 1725, Russia had 130,000 men in the army. Discipline was savage but by the death of Peter, the army was up to European standards though untested in western Europe.

The navy was essentially Peter the Great’s creation. The navy was based on the mouth of the River Don and then expanded to the Baltic Sea. As Russia lacked the necessary expertise, Peter the Great brought in foreign experts and by 1725, Russia had 48 ships of the line and 800 galleys. The officers in the navy were foreign but the crews were Russian.

The Russian Navy defeated Sweden’s navy under Charles XII and its potential for success sufficiently alarmed George I of Britain.

Military expenditure was high but it was met out of direct taxation. Revenue was expanded three times to pay for the military and wars. 85% of royal income was taken up in this way. Direct taxation was levied on households but this could be avoided by a number of houses grouping together as one ‘house’ and therefore paying the demands of just one house. Thus, the collected revenue did not keep up with the growth in population and therefore the growth in required houses.

In November 1718, Peter the Great introduced a soul tax on all males (except the clergy and nobility) with the Old Believers paying double. Peter the Great, as with the overthrown Golitsin, saw the Old Believers as a throw back to a time in Russia Peter wanted to move on from.

If a male from a village took flight to avoid paying the tax, the village itself had to make up the loss. Therefore, neighbours had a very good reason to keep a close eye on the whereabouts of a male neighbour when the soul tax was due for collection. It became the army’s responsibility to compile a list of all males in Russia. This was such a vast task, that it was not completed until 1724.

Military reforms were also financed by indirect taxes on beards, horse-collars, bee-hives etc. Royal monopolies were farmed out. Peter the Great, it seemed, would do anything to raise the necessary capital to finance his military reforms.